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ABSTRACT

Although critics claim that testing is no longer an important function of counselors, studies indicate that counselors in most settings interpret the results of psychological assessment instruments. Tests are increasingly being employed in an attempt to solve educational and social problems. In educational settings, the counselor is the professional most likely to have training in the interpretation of tests, and teachers and administrators frequently rely on them to do so. The assessment course in the graduate level curriculum continues to be necessary and must equip counselors-in-training for this function. The content needs to consider the many types of tests and test results administered for other purposes. It must be emphasized that counselors use tests primarily to assist individuals in developing their potential to the fullest. (Contains 26 references.) (JDM)

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Revitalizing the Assessment Course in the Counseling Curriculum

By
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Chapter Five

Revitalizing the Assessment Course in the Counseling Curriculum

Albert B. Hood

Abstract

Although some have claimed that testing is no longer an important function of counselors, studies indicate that counselors in most settings interpret results of psychological assessment instruments. In educational settings, the counselor is the professional most likely to have training in the interpretation of tests, and teachers and administrators frequently rely on the counselor to do so. The assessment course in the graduate curriculum continues to be necessary and must equip trainees for this function while stressing the counseling aspects of this role.

Psychological testing has long been regarded as an important function for the counselor. The psychometric tradition from which psychological testing emerged is considered a core foundation of counseling. In current practice counselors use a variety of assessment instruments ranging from intellectual to vocational to personality measures. Testing is an efficient method of getting accurate information and conveying it, through test interpretations, to the client. Counselors frequently use tests as a means of getting to know and understand their clients' personality, vocational interests, intelligence, or aptitudes. When good tests are used—those that have appropriate reliability and validity for the task at hand—the counselor, through the wise use of test integration, is able to achieve insight into the client more rapidly than is possible through an interview alone. Testing can have a powerful impact on clients, because there is a mystique to testing that enhances the message that test interpretation gives to them. Many clients are able to look at themselves more realistically if they are told about their strengths and problems during a test interpretation than if they simply

hear the information from their counselor. Psychological testing can clarify a client's personality or vocational interests and abilities, thereby accelerating counseling and saving the client money and valuable time.

For all of these reasons, an assessment course is required in all master's-level counselor training programs accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. The view has been expressed, however, that this type of course is no longer relevant as counselors are moving away from assessment and becoming more involved with activities involving personal and group counseling and psychotherapy (Bradley, 1994; Goldman, 1994b). The results of studies of the use of tests in counseling contradict this assertion, however. In an early-1980s survey of a large number of college counseling agencies, Zytowski and Warman (1982) found that more than 95% made use of psychological tests. Only nine of the total of 198 agencies did not. Specifically, 92% reported using the Strong, 81% the WAIS, 72% the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI–2; Butcher et al., 1989), 80% the Edwards, 67% the Bender-Gestalt, and 65% the DAT. More recently, Watkins, Campbell, and Nieberding (1994) in a survey of more than 600 counselors from a variety of different types of agencies found that 81% reported using assessment instruments. The MMPI, the Strong and the WAIS-R were the assessment instruments most often employed by counselors in community-based settings (Bubenzor, Zimpfer, & Mahrle, 1990). Recently, Elmore, Ekstrom, and Schafer (1998) reported that 91% of school counselors often or occasionally interpreted test scores to students; 82% did so to their parents; and 81% to teachers, administrators, and other professionals. In a survey of more than 400 members of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), respondents reported that they spent one to five hours or more per week working with tests and 67% believed that testing was an important part of their work (Elmore, Ekstrom, Diamond, & Whittaker, 1993). In his review of various surveys of the use of tests in counseling agencies, Watkins (1991) commented on the remarkable stability of test use over three decades. He concluded that (a) psychological assessment is a major component of counselor-training programs; (b) that most practicing counselors, regardless of work setting, provide assessment services and spend a fair portion of their professional time doing so; and (c) the types of assessment instruments that counselors use are very diverse.

Several decades ago Goldman (1972, 1994a) suggested that the "marriage" between testing and counseling had failed. In fact, it is obvious from the results of these surveys that, as Prediger (1994) stated, testing and counseling is a "marriage that has prevailed"; although the initial honeymoon may be over, the marriage has been sustaining and

mutually embracing, and continues to be so having now passed its golden anniversary. Thus a psychological assessment course must continue to be required in the curriculum of a graduate-level counselor-education program.

Important Themes for the Assessment Course

In any appraisal course for counselors, it should be stressed that in a counseling setting tests are used differently than in other settings where tests are employed to make decisions about individuals. In counseling tests are designed to be used by the clients themselves and only in the ways the clients decide. The course should emphasize the integrated manner in which testing is approached in counseling (Duckworth, 1990), namely the following:

Testing as an aid to client problem solving: For the individual who is coming in for help with either personal or career issues, the objective picture that a test can give is an invaluable aid in problem solving. Tests can provide clients with a way of stepping back to view their abilities, emotions, and interests in an objective, non-emotional manner—to see themselves from a different perspective and see how they compare to other people. Because counselors look for a client's strengths as well as weaknesses and problems, they use tests that report on aspects of the normal personality as well as those that report what is abnormal (Duckworth, 1990). Tests such as the Myers-Briggs, the California Psychological Inventory, and more recently the NEO have become popular, indicating the increasing use of tests designed to measure normal behavior. This approach to testing enlists the power of the client as well as the expertise of the counselor to effect instructive change.

Testing as an aid in decision making: The use of testing as an aid in decision making begins by giving clients a say in the tests that are to be used. Two of the advantages of doing so are that clients will have greater motivation to answer inventories accurately and will be more likely to use the test results to make personal changes. In order for clients to use the information for change, it is imperative that the test results be given in a language that they can understand. In addition, counselors must use non-pejorative language that describes the test information without attaching a value judgment to it. Doing so avoids the client defensiveness that typically arises when value-laden terms or psychological jargon are used.

Testing as a psychoeducational tool: Tests themselves are considered psychoeducational tools, and counselors employ them in an educative, facilitative style to enhance client exploration and reflection. In this way tests are one method by which counselors can

engage clients in a psychological, educational experience. Test results provide clients with important information about themselves that can be of value for personal growth purposes. Therefore, counselors actively involve clients in the assessment process and act as both teacher and facilitator during the experience (Duckworth, 1990). For example, career assessment usually includes the components of an individual's interests, values, skills, and abilities. These may be assessed in an integrated fashion through computer-based guidance systems or through the administration of different types of assessment instruments, participation in simulations and exercises, or the use of various performance measures. Through a factor analysis, Swanson (1993) showed clearly that interest, abilities, and skills are sufficiently distinct to be considered separate constructs worthy of independent assessment. One of the problems of using self-estimates rather than objective measures relates to their accuracy: the relationship between self-evaluation and actual ability is often very low, with mean correlations generally running below .3 (Lowman & Williams, 1987; Mabe & West, 1982). Self-ratings typically rank abilities significantly higher than do objective measures. Moreover, self-evaluations of skills and abilities show little relationship to college admissions test scores (Swanson & Lease, 1990) and contribute less to predictions of occupational attainment 11 years after high school than do ability assessments (Austin & Hanisch, 1990). Thus standardized tests and inventories contribute important information for clients to consider.

Counselors' Responsibilities

Counselors also must be able to understand and interpret the results of various tests that are not administered specifically for use in the counseling process. Tests are increasingly being employed in attempts to solve educational and social problems. National testing programs, ability-to-benefit laws, required assessments in job-training programs; credentialing tests; and mandatory state and local testing programs affect the lives of counselors daily. Tests may be given for assessing student achievement, for college admissions, for personnel selection, or for clinical diagnosis, and these results may or may not be used in counseling or therapy sessions. To adequately understand and interpret such test results—which have varying reliabilities and validities and usually are reported in terms of standard scores, T-scores, or percentiles on varying norm groups—counselors must have an understanding both of the tests themselves and of important measurement concepts. Therefore, this information must be taught in any appraisal course.

Goldman (1992) has suggested that because counselors are not qualified to understand fully all of the psychometric qualities of

psychological tests, they should not attempt to administer or interpret them, or even be trained in their use. The fact is, however, that a variety of standardized tests are used in most settings in which counselors work, and they are not only expected to be knowledgeable about these tests, but in many instances are by far the most qualified personnel to interpret them (Tennyson, Miller, Skovolt & Williams, 1989). This is especially true in educational settings, where paper-and-pencil IQ tests and basic skills tests are used in elementary schools; and achievement tests, academic aptitude tests, multiple aptitude tests, and interest inventories are used in high schools and colleges (Engen, Lamb, & Prediger, 1982). Elmore, Ekstrom, Diamond, and Whittaker (1993) reported that teachers see test interpretation as an important part of the counselor's role and expect to be able to turn to the counselor for help with testing questions. An appraisal course must prepare counselors to interpret the results of these tests to teachers, to administrators, to parents, and to the students themselves.

Graduate training programs for school administrators and teachers typically do not require instruction in measurement (Hills, 1991), and in the programs that do, these professionals often find the course content irrelevant (Impara & Plake, 1995). Of the professionals in the school setting, only counselors and school psychologists are likely to have been exposed to formal coursework in assessment. Administrators, in fact, often receive less training in basic assessment than the teachers whose work they are supposed to supervise (Stiggins, 1991). Although teachers use assessment extensively in the classroom, the training they receive is often inadequate to the task. There have also been advances in the field of testing that have rendered out of date the skills of individuals without recent training in tests and measurement. Considerable research indicates substantial deficiencies in teachers' knowledge of assessment practices. There are only four states that require such courses for prospective teachers (Hills, 1991).

If teachers and administrators are ill prepared to conduct the assessment tasks undertaken in the classroom, who then is able to do so? Who can serve as a resource for the teacher when he or she has an assessment problem? A survey showed that both administrators and teachers often report that they rely on counselors to provide answers to questions about testing (Impara & Plake, 1995). School counselors need to be trained to understand and interpret the various scores that might be found on a typical standardized test report, such as equivalents or percentile bands or stanines. Counselors have a basic understanding of the concept of reliability and errors of measurement, whereas many teachers and administrators do not. Being able to explain this concept to others and to use that notion to help teachers understand and interpret test scores and how they can be used in the assignment of grades can

be very helpful. Although this application is typically considered beyond the scope of the counselor's role in the school, nevertheless teachers often ask counselors for assistance in this and other areas related to testing (Impara & Plake, 1995). Until the responsibility for expertise in testing is shifted to some other professional, school counselors will continue to be regarded as the "experts" in the school in the area of testing. This carries a certain level of responsibility for being able to correctly interpret and explain the scores from standardized tests.

If counselors are not qualified to interpret and explain tests, then should this responsibility be left up to much less-qualified classroom teachers or principals? Who would prefer that the ASVAB be interpreted to students by a recruiting sergeant instead of a counselor? The counselor is the professional who has had a solid course in psychological testing and training in interviewing, counseling skills, and working with persons as individuals; therefore, the counselor should be the professional with this responsibility. Who else in the typical high school has an understanding of a PSAT score of 70, an ACT score of 22, or an SAT Verbal score of 325 and the meaning and potential impact of such large differences?

Certainly counselors in mental-health settings should not be expected to be able to develop an MMPI interpretation worthy of a Jane Duckworth or a John Graham; still, they should understand the difference on the MMPI between a T-score of 50 (normal) and one of 75 (severe) on the Depression scale, even if they are dependent upon others for in-depth clinical diagnoses and evaluations. If most counselors do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to use tests, it is the responsibility of graduate programs to provide these skills, not ignore them and turn out unqualified counselors.

The Assessment Course

What then should the traditional testing course now contain?

1. In the first place it should have as a prerequisite a basic course in statistical and measurement concepts. This basic course does not have to be at a particularly high level and can be taken at either the undergraduate or graduate levels as long as it provides an understanding of the normal curve, standard deviations, and correlational relationships. All counselors should have this knowledge not only for testing purposes, but even for understanding much of what appears in professional journals and in presentations at workshops and conventions. Without this prerequisite, a substantial portion of an appraisal course must be consumed with introducing simple measurement concepts, leaving insufficient time to cover the necessary

testing and appraisal skills. (Not to mention that negative attitudes are likely to be engendered in many counseling students if the first few weeks of a course in psychological testing are consumed with presenting various statistical concepts.)

2. A counseling appraisal course should contain the basic concepts of assessment including reliability and validity; standardized and non-standardized assessment techniques and performance measures; behavioral observation; and knowledge of and experience with some of the more common cognitive, career, and personality assessment instruments. The SAT/ACT and GRE/Miller can be cited as examples in illustrating some of these concepts, because almost all students have taken them and, as counselors, they will be expected to be knowledgeable about these ubiquitous instruments.

3. The testing course for counselors should differ from other testing courses in that it should emphasize the interpretation of test results. The importance of client interpretation and client understanding of the assessment results should be emphasized. The following principles should be stressed (Duckworth, 1990):

a. Testing is carried out to generate information primarily for the benefit of the client and only to a lesser extent for the counselor's benefit.
b. Clients should be active participants and collaborators in the testing process. As such, the client is involved in both the selection and the interpretation of tests.
c. Clients can be assumed to be able to profit from the testing process if given appropriate feedback from the test results. They should receive an interpretation of the test results if this is possible. The interpretation should not use psychological jargon, and descriptions of behavior and feelings should be non-pejorative.
d. Testing can give the total picture of an individual, and individuals need to know their weaknesses as well as their strengths. Assuming that the client is more normal than abnormal, the emphasis in test interpretation should be on normalcy, rather than on pathology.
e. Most clients desire to change for the better and will do so if they can understand how change is possible. Testing is a useful tool to help clients see these possibilities.
f. Work plays a very important role in people's lives, and vocational testing is often an important component of assessment.
g. The ultimate goal of psychological testing in counseling is the empowerment of the client so that he or she can be more fulfilled through increased knowledge and skills.

4. Particular emphasis should be given to the use and interpretation of tests in counseling, with emphasis on individuals and individual differences.

5. Laboratory experience with the administration, scoring, and interpretation of various assessment instruments should also be included and introduced early. Students should take, score, and profile examples of different types of appraisal instruments. When possible, they should obtain some actual, practical experience in the administration and interpretation of assessment instruments (for example, by assisting undergraduates in a 101-level course).

6. In an ideal three-semester-hour assessment course, the counselor trainees would meet as a group for two hours a week and in separate sections for one hour, according to the type of counseling program in which they are involved. Marriage and family counselors would study marital and relationship inventories in their section; rehabilitation counselors topics such as the DSM-IV, work samples, vocational assessment, and evaluation of rehabilitation potential; mental-health counselors topics such as the assessment of depression, substance abuse, and the use of general mental-health inventories; and school counselors the assessment of achievement, academic aptitude, and the use of multi-aptitude batteries. Within each specialty section, relevant new, promising appraisal tools and methods of program assessment would be introduced. Such a course design is very difficult to implement but would solve many of the problems faced in teaching appraisal courses given the diversity of the counseling field. This modified course would concentrate on assessment concepts, leaving simulations and exercises to other courses where they are relevant—for example, genogram and family sculpturing exercises to the marital therapy course, and vocational card sorts and lifestyle exercises to the vocational/careers course.

In summary, the content of a course in assessment in counseling should consider the many types of tests and test results administered for other purposes but used by counselors, as well as those tests specifically employed in the counseling process. In the counseling setting, psychological tests are used to help clients to understand themselves. With the prevalence of negative attitudes toward psychological tests, counselors may be reluctant to make adequate use of them in assisting clients, but they should remember that the use of tests in counseling differs from test use in other settings. Counselors use tests primarily to assist individuals in developing their potential to the fullest and to their own satisfaction. Such results are not designed to be used by others to make decisions on clients' behalf; instead, they are to be used by clients themselves and only in those ways in which the clients decide to make use of them (Hood & Johnson, 1991). The

emphasis must be on client understanding and client involvement in the assessment process.

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